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Critiquing War in the Classroom: Problematizing the Normalization of Gendered Militarism

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Keywords: autoethnography; feminist antimilitarism; post-secondary; war

Abstract: This paper describes an analytic autoethnographical research study focusing on experiences developing, delivering, and evaluating course content critiquing war from a feminist anti-militarist perspective. It discusses the difficulty of challenging societal notions as relates to gendered militarism in post-secondary classrooms at undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels. Thematic findings from the research include: professional vulnerability, student resistance, pedagogical possibility, and scholarly holism. This research demonstrates the importance of not only interrogating the educational experiences of post-secondary professors, but of connecting them to complex sociocultural educational issues related to war, militarism, and gender.

This paper describes an analytic (critical) autoethnographical (Anderson, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 2009) research study focusing on my experiences developing, delivering, and evaluating course content that critiques war from a feminist anti-militarist (Enloe, 2000, 2007) perspective. It discusses the difficulty of challenging societal notions as relates to gendered militarism in post-secondary classrooms. In this paper, I explain my approach to my *War, Gender, and Learning* course; discuss scholars who critique neoliberal education using critical, feminist, and antimilitarist approaches; and, outline my autoethnographical methodology. I discuss my findings as relates to: professional vulnerability, student resistance, pedagogical possibility, and scholarly holism.

War, Gender, and Learning

After being hired in a tenure-track position, I developed a course that was inspired by my dissertation research on ruling relations, warring, and mothering in the Canadian military (Taber, 2007). After bringing my proposal for a new Master of Education course, *War, Gender, and Learning*, to my department, it was approved as a trial course. This course has been taught twice and is now approved as a permanent addition to the course calendar. Course content focuses on an exploration of the ways in which gender, war, and militarism interact with human learning processes and the associated implications for educators concerned with social justice. The course explores compulsory and post-compulsory education as well as learning through popular culture and in everyday life. Additionally, I include similar topics in other courses I teach due to my belief in their importance and relevance to the education field.

Teaching Critical, Antimilitarist, and Feminist Content in Higher Education

There is a growing body of research on the difficulties (and possibilities) of engaging in critical pedagogy in higher education due to neoliberal influences (Ainley & Canaan, 2005; Brookfield, 2007). Critiquing the militarist effects of 9/11 on schooling can be particularly challenging, as

educators and scholars who question the meanings of patriotism and democracy may risk being called “a creep and a disgrace to the American flag” (Apple, 2006, p. 66). Feminists have taken up these issues, discussing the challenges of engaging in feminist scholarship (Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005), teaching about women and war near Ground Zero (Fallwell, 2005), and the “dilemmas” faced by those from Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern/Central Asian backgrounds who teach gender and sexuality studies in a time of war (Abdulhadi, 2005, p. 154).

My work, both as a teacher and a researcher, stems from a feminist anti-militarist stance, largely informed by Enloe’s (2000, 2007) work. As she argues, militarism goes far beyond national militaries, affecting daily life. Gender processes are integral to militarism, wherein a “feminist curiosity” must focus on the gendered causes and consequences of war and militarism (Enloe, 2007). I apply Enloe’s work to the field of education, exploring the ways in which militarism is implicated in formal, nonformal, informal, and incidental learning.

Autoethnography, Journal Writing, and a Feminist Analysis

This research takes an autoethnographical approach, using reflexive journal writing as a data collection method, with a thematic feminist analysis. It focuses on the educational and societal implications of my experiences developing, delivering, and evaluating course content related to critiquing war.

In her seminal edited book, Reed-Danahay (1997) describes how most researchers appear to use the word autoethnography to refer to “autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest” (p. 2). The contributors to her book take up autoethnography along a continuum with varying emphases on the self and the social. The tension between these two emphases is perhaps best exemplified by Anderson’s (2006) discussion of evocative and analytic autoethnography. The former focuses on storytelling, the latter on empirical data and social analysis. Reed-Danahay (2009) has more recently used the term critical autoethnography which corresponds to Anderson’s discussion of analytic autoethnography. As discussed elsewhere (Taber, 2010), I contend that an analytic approach is crucial in order to engage in sociocultural analyses. This research is therefore not about improving my own pedagogic practice (although that may be a tangential benefit) but is about exploring the educational and sociocultural implications of my experiences.

From January 2009 to September 2010, I kept a reflexive journal of my experiences dealing with course content critiquing war at undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels. In total, approximately 120 students participated in formal courses that specifically took up critiquing war as a topic during this time. I wrote in my journal while developing the course material as well as before class, during, and after, exploring my thoughts, expectations, reactions, and reflections in a cyclical manner, with each experience and set of reflections affecting the next (Boud, 2001). I then engaged in a thematic analysis of my journal’s content, searching for the discourses present in my everyday life in order to “explicate the actual social relations in which” my experiences were “embedded and to make these [social relations] visible” (Smith, 1999, p. 74).

Findings and Discussion: The Complexities of Critiquing War

Findings indicate the importance of the following themes: professional vulnerability, student resistance, pedagogical possibility, and scholarly holism. These themes are interlinked throughout the journal, so their order here is not intended to indicate growth from vulnerability to

holism, or resistance to possibility. Indeed, my journal is replete with examples of the co-existence of supposedly contradictory themes.

Professional Vulnerability: Working for Tenure and Course Development

My journal makes frequent references to feeling vulnerable as an untenured, younger, female Assistant Professor. This perceived vulnerability related to the tenure process at the university level, to the policies and processes of introducing new courses at the department level, as well as to responses from students at the classroom level.

In preparing for the department votes to approve *War, Gender, and Learning*, my journal recounts how I approached the meetings very strategically in order to make a sound argument for the course. An affirmative vote would be an important message to me that the department valued my educational focus. My work typically pushes boundaries, which sometimes results in my having to defend how and why it fits into education. Ironically, this is one reason why I wanted to implement the course – it highlights the often hidden ways in which we learn, opening up a sociocultural critique.

However, I was (and am) well aware that students are not always ready to engage in such a critique. The emphasis on evaluations was a frequent aspect in my journal. Positive evaluations would help me prove the importance of the course as well as have it approved as a permanent course. Therefore, I wrote that “I feel a lot of pressure (personally and professional) for this to go well.”

Reflecting on hooks’ (1994) discussion of teaching with a critical feminist pedagogy in higher education, I wrote about “the difficulty of engaging students critically within an institutional university structure that doesn’t support it, the danger of teaching critically for your own career, the frustration of resistance,” and the vulnerability that arises in challenging students’ worldviews. The power of students to affect how my tenure file was reviewed as well as if the course became permanent was continually in my mind. As I negotiate university policies on teaching as well as tenure, I am cognizant that “teachers who encourage students to ask awkward questions regarding dominant ideas run real risks” (Brookfield, 2006, p. 241) particularly with respect to the often conflicting values of university institutions and feminist pedagogues (Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005).

I have been told by students that I am too invested in analyzing gender to be “objective,” called a racist (because I critique white privilege), and accused of blaming all the troubles of the world on white men. (I am insulated from being called unpatriotic, I believe, due to my former military service.) Often, these comments end up on course evaluations, forcing me to respond so I have some record of the context of these comments. Comments such as these are always in the minority (with many more thanking me for “opening my eyes”), and yet they demonstrate the ferociousness of student resistance and the ease with which I can be attacked. This resistance as related to my own perceived professional vulnerability is explored more fully below.

Student Resistance: Defending the status quo

In my courses, student resistance to a societal critique seems to form a continuum, with a few refusing to engage with course concepts, a few who are already familiar with issues of social justice, and most somewhere in the middle. There is a need not only to confront resistance, but to problematize it, interrogating the ways in which class, race, and gender interact in a feminist classroom, among students, myself, and societal norms. Although I use ways of explaining patriarchy that do not focus on women as oppressed and men as oppressors (hooks, 2000) and

explain gender not as a static entity but as a process of performance (Butler, 1990) with a corresponding valuing of certain heteronormative masculinities and femininities over others (Paechter, 2003), students have difficulty engaging with this complex view of gender. It is often reduced to: feminism = men (bad) + women (good). The same could be said about race as students often equate a discussion of racial privilege with an attack on White people. Their guilt and need to defend themselves often becomes the discussion's focus, again centering the concerns of those who are societally privileged while marginalizing those who are not.

Simpson (2010) asks the question: "How can critical pedagogues engage students who, at least at the outset, have no obvious use for the benefits of questioning dominant forms of power?" (p. 178). As one middle-class white female student asked in relation to a discussion deconstructing issues of power and privilege, "Why would I want to question my privilege when I have power?" This power is often related to race and gender; in this case, it is particularly pertinent to questions of war, peace, and security. Moreover, these concepts are interrelated, specifically with respect to othering those who do not fit into societal dominant norms (Taber, 2009).

One of my journals entries specifically discusses the difficulties of problematizing the normalization of war:

There was a posting this morning suggesting we needed war for population control and so people could have jobs....it does let me know how deeply, deeply embedded the normalcy and acceptance of war is in society and how ignorant Westerners are about the realities of war.

It is important for me to remember that, while I deal with my course content on a continual basis, through my teaching and research, it is completely new to many students. As I wrote in my journal, "I am so immersed in it I forget it is new/frightening/challenging/radical to others."

The fact that resistance is a common reaction to learning about issues of gender, race, and class, particularly as relates to war and militarism, demonstrates the continuing need to engage with feminist theory. Students need to problematize their own views and experiences, questioning how their lives interact with systems of oppression. Resistance proves the point that the ideas I explore are relevant, important, and timely. Course content, and the ways in which the students engage with it, opens up space for pedagogical possibilities for change.

Pedagogical Possibility: Challenging Assumptions and Presenting New Perspectives

When students opened themselves up to new ideas, engaged with course content, and supported each other in their learning, the results were heartening. They challenged their understandings by looking at the world in different ways and working through resistance. A journal entry relates my thoughts about the difficulty and possibility of feminist pedagogy.

Got a gift from a student this Fall that I hadn't really realized I had reached. Very amazing...I was *so* touched – the best 'measure' (for lack of a better word) of my teaching and how I affect people's lives.... Such a sacred trust. *And* a reason to be continually critical of education and society, because there is so much we can do when we acknowledge complexity and power. ...The moments when you no longer feel as if you are banging your head against the wall are beautiful and make up for the frustration and resistance [you encounter] when you challenge power.

I found this event incredibly inspiring for my teaching. Interestingly, while the theme of student resistance positions students as barriers to learning, this theme of pedagogical possibility positions students as facilitators of learning. However, resistance is more of a complex aspect of

learning than a simple barrier to it. As mentioned above, I have noticed a continuum of resistance in my teaching, but I have also noticed a continuum of engagement. While the student above did not seem to be resisting course concepts, I had not realized how engaged she was. It reminded me that one can never truly evaluate students' learning.

Universities do not overall support learning as pedagogical possibility; they require assessment as an outcome. Increasingly, universities are viewed as masculine, hierarchical, bureaucratic (Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005), neoliberal institutions (Ainley & Canaan, 2005). Students are trained to look for answers; they can be reluctant to engage in questioning that does not have a quick fix. However, problem-posing (Freire, 2000) and questioning can be supported by relating course concepts to the concrete realities of students' lives, supporting them in finding meaning. Several students have shared course readings and concepts with others in their communities. Many others mention that the course has changed the way they view the world. While I suspect that, for other students, my course has not appreciably affected their perspectives, I am encouraged by the opportunity to bring up concepts and ideas that may be new to students. I have learned to balance my frustration at student resistance with my joy of pedagogical possibility. I see possibilities for social change.

Scholarly Holism: Connecting Research, Teaching, and Self

The ability to teach material which I feel is vitally important and connect that to my research is, quite honestly, an uplifting privilege, regardless of challenges. After spending several years teaching courses with varying degrees of connection to my research, I was quite excited to be focusing on my own particular area of interest.

With respect to tenure, I was highly cognizant of the fact that I needed to demonstrate a program of research that presented me as a comprehensive scholar with a defined area of expertise as evidenced by my publications, research projects, and teaching. I felt the need to prove my value to the institution in terms of research and teaching; in short, make an argument for my continued tenure as an academic. Luckily, this strategic plan for tenure coalesced with my own research, professional, and personal interests. Additionally, I was not overly worried that my research focus would be denigrated as inconsequential; as long as I published in recognized academic peer-reviewed journals, I was not concerned with having to argue for its importance. This in itself demonstrates my freedom as a scholar. Although I met with resistance from students and was concerned about the impact of their evaluations on my tenure file, I understood that my research would take precedence in any decisions. The focus on research over teaching is a relatively new one in universities, but it is now widely accepted that research is privileged academic work (Harris, 2005).

Unfortunately, this understanding can encourage untenured faculty to sacrifice teaching for research. It is for this reason that I found the connection between my research and teaching to be particularly helpful. Balancing research priorities and expectations with those of teaching became related work, not opposed. Furthermore, as I was able to focus on my own specific expertise, it became easier to deal with student resistance as well as find my place in my department. By implementing the new course as well as bringing in aspects of it to other related courses, I began to claim my own space as a scholar and professor. Indeed, Harris (2005) highlights the "need to reconnect research and teaching in ways which allow more criticality of our academic practice and will involve engaging with students and colleagues in 'deep' rather than 'shallow' dialogue" (p. 430). She calls for creativity and agency in order to create "democratic spaces" (p. 431). I have the opportunity to create this democratic space in my

research and teaching. I do have to work through institutional practices and policies that are not always supportive, but my privileged position as an academic demands that I use my position to continue to engage in a societal critique.

Concluding Implications

The themes of professional vulnerability, student resistance, pedagogical possibility, and scholarly holism apply not only to my own experiences in critiquing war as a female untenured Assistant Professor, but connect to a wider discussion of universities as holding institutional power for their professors' teaching and research (and thereby their continued employment), as well as students' learning experiences (and thereby their successful completion of a university degree). Issues such as class sizes, delivery methods, and assessment are outside the scope of this article, but they are important aspects of teaching that are very much under the control of university administrators. These aspects affect how professors teach (i.e. small seminars vs. large lectures) which has implications for how professors deal with student resistance and how they are evaluated. The possibilities for societal critique are linked to which courses are officially approved in university calendars, professor course load, and the opportunity to connect research to teaching. We cannot disengage ourselves from the institutions in which we work, though we can continue to problematize the learning they promote.

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